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Gorbachev's KGB crisis

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For some observers, Mikhail Gorbachev's big problem is the failure of the economy and central planning. For others, it is the urban work force and its abysmally low productivity, expressed in the words of a Muscovite, "They [the government] pretend to pay us and we pretend to work."

Or his big problem is President Reagan and the United States. Or asserting control over the bureaucracy and the military. Or the low birth-rate in the Russian sector of the population. Or dragging an industrial state into the age of the computer. Or the restive Soviet nationalities. Or the even more restive East European satellites. Or Comunist China. Or Afghanistan. Or. Or.

For this observer, Mr. Gorbachev's big problem — as it has been for every Soviet Numero Uno, starting with Stalin — is one to which he must now be devoting as much time as he is to trying to stymie President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative: how to control the secret

police, the Soviet KGB, how to prevent it from becoming an *imperium in imperio*, a state within a state.

Stalin ran the secret police by a simple strategy. Anytime a secret police chief became too useful to him, he had him executed and another one put in his place. Stalin was always fearful that the police, necessarily operating in secrecy, would in time monopolize power over state and party and thereby become independent of him. Stalin used similar terroristic techniques to prevent the rise of combinations against him.

The Soviet Numero Uno who failed to follow Stalin's techniques was Nikita Khrushchev. Even though he had been the ranking Politburocrat since 1957, he was blind-sided by a Politburo conspiracy, headed by Leonid Brezhnev, which ousted him from power on Oct. 12, 1964. What became apparent

immediately after the coup was that Mr. Brezhnev's power over the secret police during a time when he was nominally subordinate to Mr. Khrushchev was in fact greater than that of his patron. Mr. Khrushchev obviously didn't know a thing about the conspiracy until his return from a holiday direct to a Politburo meeting, where he learned his reign was over.

The Soviet secret police chief who missed his golden opportunity to reach the top was Lavrenti Beria. He was executed in 1953 by his fellow Politburocrats shortly after Stalin's death in March of that year. They were fearful that with Stalin gone, Mr. Beria, a Georgian like Stalin, would use his now uncontrolled power of the secret police to continue the same line of talented activity he had exhibited while performing as Stalin's executioner. Mr. Beria was the first secret police head to be a full member of the Politburo.

On the face of it, the only achievement of Yuri Andropov which history will record is that he was the first chief of the secret police to make it to the top. Like Mr. Beria, Mr. Andropov became the second KGB chairman to be a full Politburo member.

The accession of Mr. Andropov, Mr. Brezhnev's successor, to the ranking post of Communist Party general secretary, was a demonstration of his power against that of the Politburocrats. Their agreement, willing or not, to accept as party chief the former head of the KGB showed how important this kind of background had become to the inner establishment of the Soviet Union.

The present KGB chief is Viktor Mikhailovich Chebrikov, 62. He is not Mr. Gorbachev's appointee to the post, but Mr. Andropov's. Mr. Chebrikov became chairman, U.S.S.R. Committee for State Security (KGB) Dec. 17, 1982, following Mr. Andropov's triumph of Nov. 15, 1982. Mr. Gorbachev became party general secretary March 11 this year. On April 23, Mr. Chebrikov was elected to the Politburo. There is now ample precedent for the KGB chairman to become a full member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU.

In other words, the man who handles the dossiers, the man who can spy on his comrades, tap their telephones (Tito fired his secret police chief, Alexander Rankovich, when Tito discovered he was being wire-tapped), plant KGB informants in their retinues, and avail himself of the most modern means of scientific espionage sits legitimately as more than an equal to other Politburo members. By definition, he knows more than they do; he literally knows where the bodies are buried.

The arrival of a new Soviet party chairman always creates a crisis, sometimes visible, as presently, sometimes not, in the command posts of Soviet intelligence. And there is such a crisis in the KGB today. A new Soviet leader means realignment of KGB power-lines, demotions, promotions, defections.

Why, in the few months since Mr. Gorbachev reached the top, should there have been the defection of a KGB station chief in Britain? Why should there have been suddenly,

almost overnight, the self-exposure in Germany of one of the most successful anti-NATO, anti-West espionage rings in postwar history? Did the Soviet agents in the German government offices come up for retirement pensions after 20 years of service?

Or are there other reasons for what appears to be a breakup of a Soviet espionage center, one whose achievements can be compared to the brilliant intelligence work of

Stalin's Richard Sorge ring in pre-war Japan?

In a totalitarian society like the U.S.S.R., suspicion and mistrust among the men on top is an inevitable and incurable malady. The history of Stalin's sanguinary purges against party leaders, the fall of such powerful Politburocrats as Mr. Beria, Georgi Malenkov, V.M. Molotov, Mr. Kaganovich, Alexander Shelepin, and Mr. Khrushchev, the recent disappearance of Grigoriy Romanov at the hands of Mr. Gorbachev

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chev, all these events and more demonstrate how difficult it is to survive in this tempest-tossed ocean of totalitarianism.

And since the regime's existence, party and state, must depend upon force and cultivation of mistrust among the regime's victims, there is a sickness which occasionally becomes visible, like the sudden explosion of superhot lava from a hidden volcano. That sickness shows itself in the upper echelons of the police who guarantee the existence of the police state.

To put it at its simplest — in Lenin's famous formula — *kto, kgo?* Who rules whom? Why should Mr. Gorbachev trust the KGB's Mr. Chebrikov? Why should KGB agents in the field trust the new team in the Kremlin when they learn that their onetime protectors have been removed, demoted, transferred, or have died accidentally?

We have only seen the first events of what should be studied as a major crisis in the KGB. Either Mr. Gorbachev will take control of the police into his own hands or he will not endure.

It is my judgment that the sudden burst of espionage-itis in the United States, Britain, Germany, and France can be attributed to a struggle for power under way in the KGB and, secondarily, in the Soviet military intelligence agency, the GRU. The events in the West are merely the visible manifestations of that struggle.
